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Hilda van Neck-Yoder

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Colonialism and the author: Albert Helman's 'Hoofden van de Oayapok!'

H. van Neck Yoder

Truth can only be found in contrast... In as much as his art seeks to reflect reason and justice, the artist (is an) enemy of every collectivity. Carry van Bruggen (10, 48)¹

In 1957, Albert Helman accompanied a scientific exploration into the rain forests of Surinam, a journey which deeply affected his identity as author and his relationship to his Surinam origins. More than twenty years later, he published the journal which he kept on this exploration, *Het eind van de kaart*. In it he deplores how 'European' he had become, how like a 'stranger' he felt in the country of his ancestors (Helman, 1980: 47). Related to the native Indian people on both his father's and mother's side, the author had spent numerous childhood vacations with his relatives in the rain forests (Helman, 1984 b: 6). Now returning after an absence of close to forty years, Helman (1980: 87) describes his grief over his inability to make meaningful contact with these people whose spirit of independence he had always deeply admired:

How stupid of me not to know more than five or six...Oayana words. Here I am with all those years wasted on Ulfila's Gothic and Panini's Sanskrit, and with my belly full of Ruusbroeck's Middle Dutch.

Because he sees himself as a 'Europeanized' outsider, he assumes that they see him also within the colonial dichotomy of the civilized versus the primitive.² He is therefore moved when the Indians appear to approach him without any prejudice and even more so when their actions express that they certainly are not savages. At one point several Kalinja men treat his legs which had become infected. Few words are exchanged, but Helman feels inexpressable gratitude for their generosity and a humble recognition of their medical expertise. But an even more moving encounter takes place when he briefly visits a small, desperately poor Trio settlement, as poor a village as he has seen anywhere. There, among seemingly deserted dwellings, he meets an old woman. She points to herself and says, 'Kribisi' (Caribbean), and to his astonishment determines immediately that 'you are one of us' (Helman, 1980: 170). At the moment that he becomes aware of the extent to which he had internalized the Western view of 'the other' - inferior, savage, primitive - and the extent to which this colonial vision controlled his view of this woman, he realizes that she has a qualitatively different perspective. With great emotion, Helman (1980: 175) describes the effect of seeing himself through her:

I am no longer an author.....I have become a different person in whom the last remnants of faith in the superiority of Western civilization have totally been destroyed.....The wilderness has taught me who and what I am.....This individual being, this 'I' that distinguishes itself...from all else is only appearance..... A person...only exists with and through his fellow human beings, by the grace of 'the others', no matter how primitive.

This journey, Helman (1980: 175) writes in his journal, was not only a physical venture deep into the country of his origins; it was a spiritual journey into the essence of his own identity: 'Internally, I am again a 'savage'".

The intensity of his response to the native Indians' view of him and the decision to publish his journal almost 25 years later should be understood within the central concern of his literary work. Looking back on his career and his oeuvre in 1984, Helman (1984 b: 24) asserts that he has 'used his pen to open the eyes of (the Surinam people) to the real situation...to fight colonialism that has dominated the thought patterns of my 'own' people'.³

But, on the other hand, beginning with *Zuid-Zuid-West* in 1924, Helman also sees himself as the non-western, the 'other', addressing the European readers within the colonial context. Gert Oostindie (1986: 111) writes that for someone like Helman finding his identity is inseparable from determining his position within colonial relationships. In *Zuid-Zuid-West*, the narrator, who seems to speak for Helman, introduces the European reader to Surinam's different peoples and describes his youth among his Carib relatives in the rain forest. The novella concludes with the narrator chiding his readers for their cruelty as colonialists: 'You have been thieves for centuries' (205). Calling the readers 'bastards' ('schurken', 205), the narrator clearly sides with the victims of colonialism in sharp opposition to the reader.

The perspective from which the narrator viewed his European reader in *Zuid-Zuid-West* in 1924 is distinctly different from that of a recently published novella, *Hoofden van de Oayapok!* (1984) which has received scant critical attention. Helman's opposition to western superiority, to colonial exploitation, and to racism is still as sharp and vehement as ever. Yet the narrative perspective has clearly changed, a change that may be understood within the context of the epiphany in the wilderness, that moment of recognition of the unity between his westernized self and the savage, the 'other'.

Hoofden has a unique narrative structure through which the author leads the European readers to define themselves not in opposition to 'the other' (civilized against savage), but, instead, to view themselves as both 'we' and 'you', as both civilized and savage, a perspective that undercuts western ideology. John Berger has argued that our perspective, our way of seeing, does not depend on the object we view but on what we believe, what we consider normal and natural, on our ideology. Berger (1985: 9) stresses that seeing is never just looking. Instead, what we see is 'the relation between things and ourselves'. Writing for a European readership, Helman disturbs the reader's 'normal' way of seeing the non-civilized as object to be judged.⁴ He is not alone in his attempt to make the reader see the world from a distinctly non-European perspective. However, in *Hoofden*, Helman tries to do something unique: to create a structure through which the European readers see themselves from a perspective outside western ideology, from a perspective that is similar to Helman's recognition of his own colonialist attitudes when the Trio woman viewed him as 'one of us'.

Hoofden is organized chronologically, falling into two parts. The first part, approximately four-fifths of the book, covers about a year and a half in the

life of Malisi, a young man of the Oayampi, a people who live deep in the tropical forests of what is probably Surinam.⁵ The story begins with Malisi's return to his ancestral home from which a white missionary had taken him to Europe 15 years ago. Because Malisi had been an orphan and the surviving member of twins, the tribe had feared him as a curse.

On his return to the Oayampi, Malisi pleads for acceptance, arguing that his western knowledge will be 'useful' (19). The tribe is plagued by problems of poverty and illness, and is rapidly diminishing in numbers. He gains the trust of Taliapo, the chief, who, unlike the other elders, recognizes the role western knowledge can play in the tribe's survival. But the chief soon dies and Okinaike, the new chief, is more typical of the tribe in his rejection of western science in favor of traditions handed down orally for generations.

Malisi gets initiated and marries Akontina with whom he is deeply in love. However, after a year she dies in childbirth, and their child is stillborn. Afterwards he blames himself because he knew that western medicine could prevent Akontina's death and that of their baby, he did not have 'the courage' to go against the *pujai*, the Medicine man, who forced him to follow the 'prescriptions that have been considered the best since people can remember' (47). He decides that he can no longer accept the authority of the elders and that he can no longer tolerate the Oayapk, the river in which the bodies of his wife and child become food for the fish (51). Malisi looks at himself as a failure, for he has not been able to convince the tribe of the advantages of western science - medical as well as agricultural. Grieving over the loss of his wife, his child, his dream to belong to his own people, and angry at his own failure to persuade the tradition-oriented fathers, he leaves for Europe, vowing never to return.

The second part - Chapter Five - takes place forty years later, when the International Association of Anthropologists is honoring their famous member Malisi - whom they know only as Marius Renois - for his many publications and scientific expeditions into the area of the Amazon, where he searched for 'the Oayana, Palikoers, Oayampi, Wai-wai' (57). We learn that in the forty years it has taken Malisi-Marius to reach the pinnacle of success, he has kept his own background, his Oayampi heritage, a secret. Only now does he hint at his personal relationship to these people who, he admits, have all but disappeared: 'tribes which I have once known, from which - let me admit it myself - I originate' (58). During the ceremony, he breaks down, thinking himself to be back among the Oayampi, and addressing the professors as if they were the elders of his people: 'Heads of the Oayapok, Grandfathers of my fathers. Have I been so lacking in faith that you have never wanted to see me again?' (67). After a moment, he realizes the inappropriateness of his words and his vision. Embarrassed, he apologizes: 'Ladies and gentlemen, forgive me that for a few moments I was nog myself and that Marius Renois, forgetting all scientific objectivity, identified himself for one moment with a certain Malisi, a member of the Oayampi, for whom I have been looking ever since I left him in tears on the shores of the Oayapok many years ago' (67). If Malisi failed to adjust to his own community, Marius appears all the more succesful to assimilate into the scholarly community in Europe. But at the moment that Marius is shown recognition as 'one of us' by the community of scholars, he recognizes what he has lost: the people on whom his fame is based have 'vanished from the earth' (58). He realizes that western science does not improve the fate of the victims of western expansion and colonialism: 'Let us be honest and confess that they have been hunted by the ethnologists, the scientists to whom I too belong' (59). *Hoofden* is a strong indictment of the belief in the neutrality of social scientists.

Neither as Malisi, arguing with the Oayampi to accept western medicine, nor as Marius, conducting his 'objective' scientific research, does the narrator manage to make a difference to the fate of these vulnerable people, 'decimated by the consequence of their earliest but also their most recent contacts with western civilization' (59). Both as an insider and as an outsider, Helman's protagonist proves incapable of being 'useful'. Neither logic nor science can affect the colonial relationships.

Malisi-Marius' failure can partially be explained by his intense desire to belong, a desire which may have its psychological origin in the tribe's original rejection of him when it feared him as a curse. First, as a child among the missionaries, he 'tried to do what they did and to learn what they knew...(and) did not want to stand out' (15, 16). Now, upon returning to his own people, he tells them repeatedly, 'I am one of you' (13); 'my own people' (16); 'I want to be like you' (37); 'I will do as you tell me' (30). He begs his tribe, 'Take me back... for so long I have yearned for this moment to embrace each of you' (18, 20). But his western knowledge - medical and agricultural - makes him different. His desire to share that knowledge makes him an outsider and therefore 'suspect' (31). Finally he realizes that because his knowledge makes him 'a stranger' (23) and because he cannot 'unknow' what he believes to be true, he can no longer uphold their tradition. He believes that their ideology will destroy them. Malisi learns that wanting to be useful and wanting to fit in are irreconcilable desires.

Hoofden shows that the human impulse to belong contradicts the equally strong desire 'to decide for oneself what appears true and what appears false' (26). Marius mistakenly committed himself to western social science in his attempt to combine his desire for a community with his search for truth. Helman's Oayampi scientist, grieving over the disastrous failures of western science, hints in the end at an alternative way of searching for the truth: 'Exactly where science goes wrong, the informed heart can get us back on the right track. If only people dare to give the last word to the informed heart' (62). *Hoofden* criticizes two ways of searching for the truth - one by following tradition and obeying authority, the other by observing and recording data, without emotional involvement. The reference to the informed heart, however, points to a third kind of truth, revealed not in the story but in the structure of *Hoofden*⁶.

To understand Helman's own vision, we have to look at how the message is conveyed. In the introduction to *Hoofden*, Helman draws attention to the structure: 'I wondered if there was possibly one way of telling a complex story that had never been used before' (5). Using as his narrative structure the formal address to a mass audience, Helman creates indeed an unusual structure: a series of 'real addresses directed to a not impartial audience' (6).

Hoofden consists of five speeches. The first four are given by Malisi to the elders of the Oayapok; the last one is given by Malisi (now Marius) forty years later to the anthropologists. Each discourse is a formal occasion in response to speeches or to request action. Style, organization and to a certain extent even the content are controlled by the formality of the occasion. Yet in each speech Malisi-Marius breaks the rules, first because of his ignorance and later because of his emotional distress. He often apologizes: 'Please forgive me if I do not always use the right words' (14); 'I indeed had forgotten that it is inappropriate to address women in our meetings' (22); 'Please forgive me.....I do not feel well. I am overpowered by emotions Please forgive me' (67 - 69).

But Helman gives us Malisi-Marius' speeches only. The audience's



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response has to be inferred from Malisi-Marius' words. Of course, Malisi-Marius does have an audience, for as Walter J. Ong (1982: 171) points out, 'In oral communication speaker and hearer are present to one another'. Therefore, because we are not given the words and actions of the elders nor of the professors, we have to use our imagination. Helman's structural innovation lies in his manipulation of the reader as participant: when Malisi addresses the elders, he addresses us, his readers; and, when Marius addresses the professors, he addresses us also. We are led to imagine ourselves as elders deep in the rain forests along the Oayapok, and later as professors in an elegant auditorium of one of the universities in the Netherlands.

Through the narrative structure, Helman implicates us, the readers, in Malisi's dilemma. The conflict within the story of *Hoofden* lies between Malisi-Marius and the elders-professors, but on a rhetorical level the conflict lies between Malisi-Marius and the readers, participants in the fictional dialogue. In the first four speeches, Malisi attempts to convince us, in our role as elders, of the importance of western knowledge. As readers we agree with Malisi, sharing his frustration over his disagreement with us, the Oayampi elders. In other words, we as readers develop an ironic relationship to our identity as elders. In the second part, we readers are members of the community of anthropologists, a community most readers would be pleased to be part of, especially since the social scientists honor Marius, whom we as readers - though not as elders - already admire. We are probably much more at ease having exchanged our identity of Oayampi elders for that of university professors. Helman may, however, be playing on our determination as westerners to think of our 'objective' scientific method as superior to the ancestor worship of the Oayampi, and on our belief in the scholar's innocence within in the colonial legacy of Europe. Our faith in the superiority of the West is confirmed twice: first in the Oayampi's rejection of Malisi and secondly in the scholarly honoring of Marius.

Our comfortable feeling as scholars is suddenly undercut, just before the conclusion. Grieving over the disappearance of his tribe, Marius invites us to visualize the Oayampi: 'I see them in front of me, even here, the small settlements of ten to thirty huts' (60). He urges us to use our imagination: 'Look! There they are strolling.....Notice how carefully they use their words' (60 - 61). As a scientist addressing the scholarly community, Marius realizes that he has 'to suppress these (visions) now that I am standing here before you' (61). As Marius loses contact with reality and thinks himself to be back by the Oayapok, it is clear that the scholarly audience thinks he speaks nonsense. But we as readers, unlike the professors, understand why Marius breaks down. Having been elders, we know what he wants us to see. And unlike Marius, we consider his breakdown not as something to apologize for but as a genuine expression of his emotional pain. We now understand the world from a perspective that is qualitatively different from that of the elders, that of the scholars, and that of Malisi-Marius. We now have an ironic relationship to our role as scholars, as well as to that as elders, yet we do not identify or side with Malisi-Marius. We are fragmented into overlapping identities, our stable point of perspective destroyed. We are readers, sitting at home reading *Hoofden*; we are elders, adhering to the legacy of our forefathers; we are scholars, listening to Marius, our colleague who seems to be overcome with emotion and begins to speak strangely and inappropriately for this formal occasion; and we experience something new: a perspective that goes beyond that of all three - reader, elder, and scholar -, a complex, contradictory consciousness created by the structure of this novella. Helman guides his readers to stand outside their own colonial ideology.

How do readers' complex perspective and the readers' ironic relationship to the characters in the novella relate to the basic issues raised in the conflict of the story of *Hoofden*?

A possible key to the relationship between meaning and perspective in *Hoofden* lies in its contrast to *De foltering van Eldorado*, published a year earlier. *Foltering* is a historical study of what Helman calls 'Great Guyana', an area on the Northwest coast of South America that stretches from the Orinoco river in the Northwest to the Amazon in the Southwest. Helman argues against the region's current political separation (as part of Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, French Guyana, and Brazil) in favor of a unity that is based on geographical and ecological criteria. *Foltering* is a sharp rejection of western ideology and Eurocentric historiography.

In *Foltering*, Helman's extra-European perspective is immediately clear: 'This is written from the point of view of the native' ('inboorling') (7). The introduction concludes with the author's confession that it has 'taken him a lifetime of study, thought, and experience...to be able to take off his European glasses through which he had learned to see' (8). The strong authorial presence and the apparent rejection of the conventions of objective scholarship are striking. Though thoroughly researched with an impressive bibliography, *Foltering* has few footnotes and does not include any references to sources within the text. In Edgar Cairo's words (1983), 'the relation between facts and sources is lost'. The reader has to take the author's words as true. Forcefully, Helman argues his interpretation: 'The total integration of these countries is not only desirable but also possible.....No human power can keep separate what is in nature and origin one' (466).

What is, however, even more puzzling is that after 466 pages of persuasively argued prose, the author wonders 'what the western reader can do with all this'. Undermining his own role as historian, he concludes that no social scientist is able to make the western reader understand colonialism to the extent that the writers can (467). Having written a history of a colonized region from the perspective of the colonized, Helman now expresses his doubt that such a work and such a perspective can affect the European who has not experienced colonialism. Helman here questions the role that the historians, sociologists, anthropologists (even those who write as non-westerns) have played in maintaining colonial relationships.

He concludes that to gain insight into their own colonial attitudes towards 'strange and little known peoples', his readers have to go to literature, specifically to Shakespeare. For Helman argues that 'no one has presented the superior attitude of the white person toward the colored person, considered uncivilized and inferior, with as much empathy and insight as Shakespeare' (467). To Helman, *The Tempest*, the drama of Prospero and Caliban, is the epitome of the image of human relationships within a colonial ideology. He refers to Caliban's modern day descendent as the 'wild man from hell' ('wilde helleman') (468), creating a play on words with his own name and thereby calling attention to his own role as a poet, as 'other', as visionary, and as savage, a reference which points forward to his next work, *Hoofden*.

Hoofden clearly is intended to be read within the context of *Foltering*. Published with the same distinctive red-orange cover and beige lettering, *Hoofden* states on the back that it is a poetic rendition of *Foltering*. It reworks the ethnographic information given in *Foltering*. In fact, some of the words spoken by characters in *Hoofden* are the same as those written by the author in *Foltering*.⁷

In addition, *Hoofden* illustrates the conclusion of *Foltering*, that even a non-western social scientist has no effect on the way Europeans look at

'the other'. The conclusion of *Foltering* and the internal and external similarities between *Foltering* and *Hoofden* point to the author's interest in exploring the relationship between ideology, social science and fiction in his desire to make his European readers understand their own role within colonial relationships. In his desire to 'revise...the story of us...and of you' (468), Helman indicates his preference in favor of imaginative language over that of the argument.

Frank Martinus (1977: 4v) has argued that the search for integration - both within the individual and within the community - is a central theme within Helman's work. As we have seen, the protagonist of *Hoofden* is driven to be 'one of us', to be integrated within a community - as a child among the white missionaries, as a young adult among the Oayampi, and finally as an old man among western social scientists. Helman shows us that the instinct to fit in had destroyed Malisi's personality and thereby his desire to be 'useful'. 'Marius' has repressed 'Malisi', his 'otherness', for to assimilate means upholding the colonial myth of the dichotomy between savage and civilized, between 'them' and 'us', between outsiders and insiders.

Hoofden together with *Foltering* is Helman's Testament.⁸ Together they narrate the cost of upholding a colonial ideology: the genocide against native peoples and the disintegration of the individual. Yet by inscribing the reader inside *Hoofden*, the author, in effect, affirms his belief in the power of the imagination to guide us to a humane community. *Hoofden* is an argument for the 'usefulness' of the artist: for by appealing to our imagination the artist can teach us to look for the truth in our heart - in our 'informed heart'. As a writer, Helman makes us experience what he as a historian could only state: that in our acknowledgement of our individuality of our otherness - lies our only hope to become 'one of us'.

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Eindnoten:

- 1 All translations from Dutch into English are my own.
- 2 For discussions about the centrality of this dichotomy in our western imagination, see Baudet (1976), Gates (1986), Said (1979).
- 3 Frank Martinus (1977: 14) points out that such an interest is not always appreciated 'at home'.
- 4 For an analysis of the way European writers have represented the non-western world, see Pratt (1982 and 1986).
- 5 This is the actual name of one of the tribes that Helman visited on the 1957 expedition. During this visit, Helman met a thirteen year old Oayampi orphan whom he took along to be raised in Paramaribo. The Oayampi believed that because she was an orphan she carried a curse. (Helman, 1980: 154)
- 6 I assume that with his 'denkende hart' Helman alludes to Bettelheim's *The Informed Heart*.
- 7 For example the translation of Black Elk's prayer is used in *Hoofden* (34) and is also part of the text in *Foltering* (448). For the original, see Neihardt (1972: 205 and 278).
- 8 Helman (1983: 8) calls *Foltering* his 'testament'.